

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Mabel Hubbard Bell, February 18, 1901

February 18, 1901. Dear Mabel: —

I send for your information a copy of a proposition from the Bureau of National Literature and Art, that I should act as editor-in-chief of an important and valuable educational work which they are now bringing to completion. I also send copy of my reply.

BY THE BY — I can't keep a secret from you — never could — and Charlie says I can't if I try now, but — it may not be uninteresting to you to know that you have a big and unexpected dividend coming in to you in a short time. Charlie thinks that it will amount to (for amount see over)

Charlie wants to know what to do with it — thinks you should invest about ten thousand of it, and says: — Why wouldn't this be a good time to carry out suggested plans for re-opening Volta Laboratory with Chester associated. I am inclined to think so too. I therefore suggest that you invest ten thousand dollars by loaning it to a new Volta laboratory Association, consisting of Chichester A. Bell and A. G. B., without interest, for (nearly TWENTY THOUSAND DOLLARS — International Bell Telephone dividend). 2 a one third share in the profits or any interest you like without share in the profits ! . The interest in the Volta Laboratory Association to be divided into three parts; one for C.A.B., one for A.G.B., and one for M.G.B.

C.A.B. and A.G.B. to supply the ideas, and M.G.B. the capital to put them into execution. I enclose a note to Chester, making him a definite proposition, which — if you approve, please forward to him at once.

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Do not mention the following to anybody, but I am very much afraid that my Uncle David is failing. No one has said this to me, but this is the result of my own observations. I am very much touched at his constancy to his life's work. Ever since I knew him he has been out of sympathy with his surroundings, and they with him. In 1842 he left the stage — largely, I think, because Aunt Ellen's family objected to her marrying an actor. He has lived since then in close and LONELY association with Shakespear and the great writers of the past: — And today, as he nears his end, he glories in the fact that he was once an actor, and feels indignant with those of his family who would feel ashamed of the fact.

While on the one hand he has never shown any strong interest in the affairs of the family and in their occupations, on the other hand they have shown no sympathy with his. I know no man who responds more quickly to sympathetic words, expressive of interest, in his life work. He has always impressed me as a man of great emotions, and not at all to be rightly credited with indifference. He may love — he may hate — but he simply cannot be indifferent. He has been wrapped up in his life work, and the feeling that many of his friends, not only do not appreciate it, but actually look down upon it, has acted, in my opinion, to turn a naturally generous, warm hearted man — full of the milk of human kindness — into a cynic, who “cares for nobody, no not he, and nobody cares for him.”

He left the stage in 1842 and he has been an actor ever since. Shut up with his books in his study, he has revelled in the best that literature can provide, and has left the real living world alone. And today, as he is conscious that his end approaches — he is letting himself out upon his past life. He claims to be the oldest actor living, having been upon the stage when only three years of age — over eighty years ago.

He had a very happy time last night in having old play bills read to him that had been preserved in a scrap book — play bills referring to “Master D. Bell,” a boy of only eleven years of age, who played Romeo to Miss Somebody's Juliet: And this Miss Somebody (I don't remember the name) afterwards married a Mr. Crisp, and was the mother of our Mr.

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Crisp, Speaker of the House of Representatives. I wonder whether Mr. Crisp ever knew that my uncle and his mother played Romeo and Juliet together over seventy years ago.

4

My uncle seems to delight in recalling the past, and he says every now and then Now remember this, and remember that, as though he wished us to remember things concerning himself after he has passed away.

It occurs to me that it would be a good plan to have Mrs. Pratt come down here just now — for various reasons. I am inclined to think that my uncle is in a frame of mind to dictate an account of his life: — And that he would enjoy it — and that it would do him good. He now sees so imperfectly that he is no longer able to read for himself, and this fact — considering how much of his life has been spent with books — is apt to make him feel morbid.

Charlie thinks that he would enjoy doing this, and then, it would be an important thing for us all. We know very little about the early life either of my father or my uncle. My father is more a thinker than a talker, and it is very difficult to get information from him, excepting by persistent cross-examination. My uncle, on the other hand, is a great talker. He delights to speak of my father's boyhood and his own, and to give interesting reminiscences concerning their parents and grand-parents. The only trouble is, I don't know how far his memory is to be relied upon for strict accuracy of details.

How I have run on! I thought I was only going to dictate 5 a few lines, and here already I have written — no SPOKEN — several pages.

I enclose newspaper cutting from the Post, which seems to indicate that Queen Victoria was after all a relative of yours, for the writers claim that she did have Saxon descent. “through Convent bride of Conqueror's son” — so that she could claim descent through your ancestor Alfred the Great.

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I also enclose a poem, by Sir Edwin Arnold "He and She". A perfect gem — a thing one can only read to one's self — . It seems a desecration to read it aloud: —

"Dumb to the ear and still to the sense, But to the heart — and to SOUL — distinct — intense. See now; I will listen with soul, not ear: What was the secret of dying, dear.....

"Oh perfect dead! Oh dead most dear! I hold the breath of my soul to hear." &c.

"There must be pleasure in dying, sweet, To make you so placid from head to feet! I would tell YOU, darling, if I were dead, And t'were YOUR hot tears upon MY brow shed —

"You should not ask vainly, with streaming eyes, Which of all deaths was the chiefest surprise, The very strangest and suddenest thing Of all the surprises that dying must bring"., &c., &c.

6

Miss Safford says this whole letter is about dying, and that I better wind up by saying something cheerful.

Prof. Newcome and I have been trying to come together for a long time past. I call upon him at nine o'clock at night, and find him in bed; and he calls upon me here at ten o'clock in the morning and finds me — well — [???][???][???] — not exactly visible — so that we have enjoyed a sort of Box and Cox acquaintance. But today we came together at a decent time in the morning — half past eleven — and arranged for a meeting in Mr. Walcott's office at the Geological Survey on for Tuesday afternoon at half past four, at which will be present all the Washington members of the National Academy of Sciences. We are going to arrange for a dinner to the National Academy, from eighty to ninety plates, given to the Academy by the Washington members.

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The only difficulty is that Prof. Langley objects to having the expenses unequally divided among the Washington members, although it is obvious to both Prof. Newcomb and myself that as some of the Washington members could not afford to pay their quota, — insist?nce upon this would cause the whole thing to be abandoned. I shall propose that Prof. Newcomb be appointed a Committee to raise the amount required by voluntary subscriptions from the Washington members of the Academy, and I will arrange with him to supply the deficiency. The total amount required will be about four hundred dollars, say five hundred, and if the Washington 7 members should subscribe one half of the amount — and they will do much more than that — the balance required would not exceed two hundred and fifty dollars.

It was proposed upon the equal distribution plan — that each Washington member should be assessed forty dollars. It would be well that they should have this amount in mind as to what the equal proportion proportion would mean, and then make such contributions voluntarily as they felt they could afford. Some would give more, some would give less; but I would propose that the amounts contributed by each should not be known, but the statement simply be made that the dinner is given to the National Academy “BY THE WASHINGTON MEMBERS”.

A few jokes in conclusion: —

The Irishman's definition of “strategy” —

When you are out of ammunition, don't let the enemy know, but KEEP ON FIRING.

In the primeval forest you know, the moss grows on one side of the trees, and only the bark shows on the other, and by a knowledge of this fact hunters can tell north from the south, &c., without a compass. The question arose the other day on which side does the bark grow. Answer: — THE OUTSIDE.

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Judge has some good things occasionally among the musings of a disappointed spinster. Among other things she remarks that men cannot hope to decrease their debts by CONTRACTING THEM.

Very true, so I shall say good bye, with the remark that this is as applicable to women as to men — even when they have a twenty thousand dollar dividend unexpectedly coming in.

Your loving husband Alec. P. S. The turtle doves are still cooing, and have taken a furnished house, I believe, into which they soon expect to move from the Everett. I saw Charlie and Grace last night at Uncle David's. Both seemed well — Charlie especially so. Grace looked as though she had been up all night for a long time past — as she has. Bobby paid me a visit here some time ago, all by himself (with Mary in charge) to see about that Christmas present for him that was stowed away in the Bureau waiting until he had become tired of all the other things. He announced that he had tired of them now — at least sufficiently to get this presnet — so I gave it to him and sent him away happy.

Belongs in Drawer No. 18 ... DR. BELL'S ROOM, Hubbard Memorial 1156 — 16th Street, Washington, D. C.

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